GLSEN®

School Board Advocacy Toolkit

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School Board Advocacy Toolkit

Local school districts, school boards, individual schools, and Superintendents craft and implement the majority of policies that directly impact students every day, and make decisions that will shape the climate in our schools for years. The same is true for State Legislatures when legislative sessions around the country gavel in. There has never been a more important time to show up, tell your story, and demand schools respect all students and all families, and school-based policies must encourage positive school transformation, where LGBTQ+ identities are affirmed and every student can thrive and reach their full potential.

82% of LGBTQ+ youth reported feeling unsafe in school, and things are only getting worse. New anti-LGBTQ+ bills and school board policies are introduced daily and more students are being stripped of safe and affirming schools, learning environments, books and resources.

This toolkit is designed to share resources and best practices for engaging with and advocating in your local school districts for and/or against policies affecting LGBTQ+ students in school. This toolkit can be used by organizations and individuals. In it, you'll find a primer on how to engage with school boards including information on what school boards are responsible for, strengthening relationships with your local elected members on the school board; tips for crafting testimony; how to engage with your community members on social media; safety and security precautions; and issue-specific data, talking points, and facts and myths. You can navigate this toolkit through the table of contents and adapt the resources depending on your needs. If you need any technical assistance or would like to share feedback with GLSEN's Organizing and Training department, email damon.carbajal@glsen.org

How to Engage with School Boards 101

What are school boards and what do they work on?

1. Education is the cornerstone of our democracy, and schools should be places of liberation where every student can thrive and reach their full potential.

2. Public schools should be controlled by the public they serve. Schools should be at the center of community revitalization, and school districts and board members craft and implement the majority of policies that directly impact students every day.

3. School boards are the closest form of government to community members and have immediate, tangible impacts.

   - There are more than 14,000 school districts in the United States governed by more than 95,000 school board members. These leaders help direct the expenditure of more than $600 billion annually to teach more than 50 million students (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sdrp.html, NCES: https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/). (There are less than 7,400 members of state legislatures – House AND Senate – in all 50 states, in comparison)

Board members may be either elected or appointed, and school boards make crucial decisions on issues that matter:
- School safety
- Modernizing facilities
- Establishing and implementing policies
- Employee relations
- Hiring the superintendent
- Developing and overseeing budgets
- Setting the school calendar
- Approving curriculum materials
- Ehnsuring that teachers and students get the resources they need
- Dealing with controversy and seeking solutions to problems

Most school board members have never held prior public office. While civic engagement can be intimidating, your local school board members are everyday people who are your neighbors, educators, business owners, concerned residents, local leaders, parents, retirees, and district alumni who (should) share a common purpose: doing what's best for students and the communities they call home.

Levels of decisions - local, state, federal

Now that we have a general overview of what school boards do, let's dive into a school's board place in the larger structure that governs education in the United States. A key part of advocacy is to make asks to the correct leadership body who has control over what you want to change. For example, you would not want to advocate for how federal education dollars are being distributed at a school board meeting because only federal policy decision makers determine how federal education funds are allocated.

The below summary outlines, broadly, the role that different levels of our government play in determining education policy. For more information on the structure of school governance in your state, refer to your state education agency.

Local Policy

Local schools boards — in nearly all jurisdictions composed of directly elected members — have the most significant control of any level of government on the day-to-day operations of schools. There are more than 14,000 school boards across the country that shape the experiences of students each day. Additionally, district and building level staff (such as superintendents and principals) implement board policy and impact student learning and experience.

In most localities, school boards have broad authority to:

1. Set policy and oversee budgets;
2. Oversee the day-to-day operations of the schools within the district;
3. Make personnel decisions;
4. Set curricula within state guidelines; and
5. Oversee training and professional development for staff.

State Policy

While the functions and responsibilities of state school boards vary by state, most are responsible for:

1. Funding public education at all levels;
2. Licensing or chartering private schools and public and private institutions of higher education;
3. Providing oversight to local school boards;
4. Setting broad policies for school-level curricula, texts, standards, and assessments;
5. Licensing school teachers and other educational personnel, and determining licensing requirements;
6. Overseeing educational services for persons living with disabilities and other special needs populations; and
7. Electing or appointing members of the governing boards of public higher education institutions and state boards of education.

Federal Policy

Through the U.S. Department of Education, the federal government works to increase student achievement in four ways:

1. Establish policies related to federal education funding, distributes funds, and monitors use;
2. Collect data and oversee research on America's schools;
3. Identify major issues in education and bring national attention to them; and
4. Enforce federal laws prohibiting discrimination in programs that receive federal funding.

Source:
U.S Department of Education

Local Policy

Key Local Decision Makers

School Board Members
School boards members are the elected officials affecting decisions made about education. School boards may have more or less authority depending on the state but always play a critical role in overseeing the day-to-day operations of schools, and have a large impact on the district's curriculum, teaching staff, and policies.

District Level Staff
District level staff (e.g., superintendents) are unelected and report to the school board. Different districts may hire different district staff to oversee school operations and make decisions. These may include positions responsible for teacher training, curriculum design, and equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB)

Principals and Other Building Leadership
Building level staff generally report to the superintendent of schools in the district. They impact school culture, are often responsible for handling student discipline, and often directly manage teaching staff.

Department Chairs
In many districts, department chairs are teachers in the department that have additional responsibility for helping teachers develop curricula, and assist in teacher training and development.

State Policy

Key State Decision Makers

State Boards of Education
With the exception of Wisconsin, North Dakota, Minnesota, and New Mexico, each state has a State Board of Education. Members of these boards are either directly elected, or else appointed by the governor of the state. State school boards often play an important role in the development of curricula standards. For more information about your state visit your public department of education's website.

Chief State Schools Officers
Each state has a chief state schools officer. These officials may hold a variety of titles such as State Superintendent of Schools or Secretary of Education. These officials may be directly elected by voters, appointed by the state's school board, or appointed by the governor. To learn more about how your state's education officials are elected, refer to your local education agency.

State Legislators
In some states, state legislators are tasked with confirming the governor's appointments to the State Board of Education and/or the Chief State Education Officer. Legislators also often retain oversight authority over these departments and officials. Finally, legislators have the authority to pass legislation that can impact curricula, training of teachers and administrators, and school funding.

Governors
In many states governors appoint Chief State Education Officers and members of State Boards of Education. Additionally,

Federal Policy

Key Federal Decision Makers

Members of Congress
Members of Congress have the authority to draft and pass national legislation, including laws aimed at combating classroom censorship efforts and supporting the right to learn. Congress also provides funding to the U.S. Department of Education, and uses this power to set federal priorities and programs impacting school districts across the country.

Secretary / Department of Education
The U.S. Department of Education is responsible for administering federal education programs established by Congress, including initiatives such as Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind. These programs can substantially impact the ways states and school districts administer their schools by setting requirements (for example around curricula and testing) schools need to follow to be eligible for federal funds.

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Local Policy	State Policy	Federal Policy
Examples of Decisions Made	**Examples of Decisions Made**	**Examples of Decisions Made**
Curriculum Implementation: School districts decide how state standards are implemented, including textbook selection and instructional methods.	Education Standards: The state sets educational standards, including what students should learn at each grade level.	Federal Funding: The federal government provides funding through programs like Title I for low-income schools and special education funding.
Hiring and Staffing: They are responsible for the superintendent of the district.	Funding: States provide a significant portion of funding to schools, including through grants and state-specific programs.	Civil Rights Enforcement: It enforces civil rights laws to ensure equal access to education for all students, regardless of race, disability, or gender.
Budget Management: Districts manage local budgets, allocate funds for schools, and make decisions on resources and facilities.	Testing and Accountability: They administer statewide standardized tests and enforce accountability measures, ensuring schools meet performance criteria.	National Education Initiatives: The federal government may introduce nationwide programs or standards, such as the Common Core (which states may choose to adopt) or initiatives like No Child Left Behind.
School Policies: They establish school calendars, student conduct policies, and extracurricular activities.	Teacher Certification: States establish requirements for teacher certification and licensure.	Research and Data: Federal agencies collect data on education and fund research to inform education policy.
Adopting collective bargaining agreements: They bargain on behalf of the school district for unions represented in the district.		

Adapted from the ACLU's "School Governance 101" - https://www.aclu.org/rtl-resources/school-governance-101

TIP - Make sure you do your research and are advocating to the right governing body. For example - charter schools and private schools have their own governing board and will not be governed by the larger public school board.

Tool - Checklist: LGBTQI+ Policies for School Districts

Use this checklist to note where your school district stands regarding policies for LGBTQI+ students - checklist look at policies around bullying, harassment, and discrimination; sex-separated spaces and activities; and student privacy and confidentiality.

- **Click here to access the Checklist: LGBTQI+ Policies for School Districts**

Why should you get involved in school boards?

Education is inherently local and personal. Hand in hand with school boards, communities can transform our nation's K-12 schools into the safe and affirming environment all youth deserve.

LGBTQ+ students and families are a part of every school district. Beyond fighting anti-LGBTQ+ policies, advocates can encourage a school board to adopt model policies for LGBTQ+ students on harassment and discrimination and trans and non-binary inclusive school policies, which have been shown to have positive impacts on school climate and educational outcomes for LGBTQ+ students.

Even though they are in the minority in most places, opponents of LGBTQ+ youth and inclusive education have been making a big noise at school boards and other public meetings lately, which is why making sure public officials hear from allies is more important than it has ever been, and can make a real impact on what happens next in your community.

Here are a few ways for you to begin getting involved with your local school board:

1. **LEARN MORE:** Visit your school district's website and look for information about the governing body's policies, agendas, or meetings (usually called a School Board), attend local meetings (school boards, delegation meetings, etc.) or watch previous meetings online. Not enough people regularly attend meetings, so you can make a huge impact.
   a. Try to review district agendas regularly to ensure you remain aware of topics being taken up by your district. Protocols vary, but there's usually an opportunity to sign up for an "open comment" section to raise any issues, ask questions and share your opinions about the schools in your community.
   b. If you would like to speak at a school board meeting, this toolkit will provide you with some guidance on how to structure your testimony and speak effectively on the issues that are impacting LGBTQ+ students in schools.
   c. If you aren't comfortable speaking, just your attendance and sharing the information with other members of your community will help send a message that your community stands against hateful rules and regulations that school boards are considering, and are in favor of policies that respect, value, and support LGBTQ+ students.

2. **IN THE NEWS:** Research your district's school board in the news and keep track of any actions and policies that anti-educational freedom groups or members plan to undertake.

3. **MEET WITH YOUR MEMBERS:** Meet or email with school board members. Establish yourself as a concerned constituent and engaged stakeholder that would like to remain involved if any policies surrounding LGBTQ+ students are being considered. Consider sharing some model policies with the members if your district does not already have comprehensive policies on bullying and harassment or support for transgender and nonbinary students.

4. **GET CONNECTED:** Whenever possible, find out who's already organizing on this issue and see how you can join them. If there's no one taking the lead yet, see if you can get some friends, colleagues or neighbors to come together to work out a plan. You will always make more of an impact if there are more of you speaking up together. And sometimes there are delicate negotiations happening behind the scenes, or other considerations that you can learn about in advance from folks who are already working on the issue.

Getting to know your school board

One of the most important parts of effective advocacy is to know the basic information about the school board you are working with as well as who the members are. This basic information is not only critical for effective advocacy but also essential for safety and strategizing for a win. Without this background information, your advocacy work will be much more difficult - you need to know the meeting basics as well as the leanings of the members, their history, and how they view specific topics.

Tool - School Board Meeting 101 Form

The School Board Meeting 101 Form is meant to aid in gathering information about the actual Board of Education Meeting (i.e. School Board Meeting). This tool should be completed annually for each school district in your area. The basic information helps you know when/ where meetings take place, how meetings are run, and the spaces where you have the opportunity to advocate.

- Click here to access the School Board Meeting 101 Form

TIP - You may find the information to complete the School Board Meeting 101 Form in a variety of places, including, but not limited to, the board of education website, board handbook, school district page.

Tool - Board of Education Member Profile

The Board of Education Member profile is meant to aid in gathering information about the people who serve on the school board (or other governing board). This tool should be completed after each election, appointment, or change in leadership of the school board. The information helps to not only humanize and give face to the board members but also to note their history, personal politics, and affiliations with the larger community. All important information for safety, strategy, and how the make-up of the board may handle specific topics and themes.

- Click here to access the Board of Education Member Profile

TIP - You may find the information to complete the Board of Education Member Profile in a variety of places, including, but not limited to, the board of education website, personal websites, social media, community organization pages, campaign contribution reports, etc.

Ways to Rise Up

Showing Up and Showing Out

One of the most effective ways to advocate at the school board level is to "show up and show out." The visual impact of a group of folks standing in solidarity and community with each other has a lot of impact —this is especially true for when there are policies in question that touch on identity.

Showing up and showing out is a great strategy when a meeting does not allow public comment or if the public comment section will be capped. This often happens when a topic has caused opposition to some form of controversy within the larger district community. What you wear and or hold can show your opinion on an issue. So, wearing rainbow colored or pride items can show solidarity for policies aligned with LGBTQ+ topics. As you prepare for the meeting, think about what your outfit is saying, even if you cannot directly provide a comment.

Besides your physical appearance and clothing choices, you can also use visual elements to show off your stance on a topic. This could include signs, stickers on your laptop that you may use during meetings, etc. Small handheld signs are an effective way to communicate a message in a nonverbal way.

TIPS

1. **SIGNS:** If you opt for signs—the more there are, the more impact it has. So you could hold a sign making party (if time allows) or for fast mobilization - create a bunch of small signs on brightly colored paper and have a stack for others when they join you at the meeting.

2. **MEETING RULES:** Make sure to check any rules or guidelines around what can and cannot be worn or held up at meetings. Some rules may ban using signs as a form of advocacy and we want to ensure the chosen advocacy strategy aligns with meeting decorum.

3. **OPEN MEETING LAWS:** Make sure to check what open meeting laws exist in your state. These laws are enacted to ensure equality and access to meetings and are required to be followed by public schools boards.

4. **SAFETY FIRST!:** Keep safety in mind regarding dress and any visual elements you may use. There is most likely going to be opposition in the space, thus make sure to ask the question, if what I am wearing is going to cause a safety issue for myself, what else can I wear. Some examples could be an item that you can remove before exiting the meeting space (i.e. buttons, a hat, rainbow accessories, or a jacket to cover up a t-shirt).

Social Media Advocacy

Using social media to advocate for school board and school district policies can be highly effective if done strategically. Here's a step-by-step guide to help you get started:

1. Define Your Goals
- Identify Specific Policies: Focus on particular policies or changes you want to advocate for.
- Set Clear Objectives: Decide what you want to achieve—e.g., increased awareness, policy changes, or community support.

2. Understand Your Audience
- Know Your Stakeholders: Identify who you want to reach—parents/ guardians, teachers, students, community members, etc.
- Tailor Your Message: Customize your content to address the interests and concerns of each group.

3. Choose the Right Platforms
- Facebook: Great for local community groups and sharing detailed posts.
- Instagram: Effective for visual content and engaging younger audiences.
- TikTok: Great for short videos to garner attention around the issue - will reach youth audiences more effectively than other social media platforms
- LinkedIn: Ideal for professional networking and connecting with education professionals.

4. Create Engaging Content
- Share Information: Post about current policies, proposed changes, and their impacts.
- Use Data and Facts: Provide clear, factual information to support your advocacy.
- Share Stories: Personal stories from students, parents/guardians, and teachers can be powerful.
- Use Visuals: Infographics, videos, and charts can make complex information more accessible.

5. Engage with Your Audience
- Respond to Comments: Engage with those who comment on your posts to foster discussion.
  - TIP - Dealing with Trolls and Hateful Comments: Please refrain from engaging with trolls and hateful comments. Instead, consider hiding or flagging offensive comments.
- Ask Questions: Encourage followers to share their opinions and experiences.
- Create Polls: Use polls to gauge community support and gather opinions.

6. Collaborate with Others
- Partner with Influencers: Work with local influencers or advocates who share your goals.
- Join or Form Groups: Connect with existing advocacy groups or create your own.

7. Advocate with Actionable Steps
- Call to Action: Encourage followers to attend school board meetings, write letters, or participate in petitions.
- Provide Resources: Share links to relevant documents, petitions, or contact information for school board members.

8. Monitor and Adjust
- Track Engagement: Use analytics tools to see what content performs best and adjust your strategy accordingly.
- Stay Updated: Keep track of changes in policies and adapt your content to reflect new developments.

9. Maintain Consistency and Professionalism
- Be Consistent: Regularly post updates to keep the issue in the public eye.
- Stay Professional: Maintain a respectful and professional tone to build credibility and respect.

By following these steps, you can effectively use social media to advocate for school board and school district policies, rallying support and driving change.

Public Comment

The "Story of Self" approach (developed by Marshall Ganz): Tell about a Challenge you faced, the Choice you made, and the Outcome of the situation. When using this framework, be sure to indicate how the challenge made you feel and the values that determined your choice. This can help your story have a moral or teach a lesson.

Your testimony

Before you begin drafting, ask yourself:
- Why are you testifying or sharing your story?
- What do you want from your audience?
- What values inspire you and might inspire others?

Building Your Story
- Introduce yourself and explain your connection to inclusive education or what your end-goal is.
- Tell a story from your life about why this issue is important.
- Be cognizant of what details and information you share as it relates to confidentiality and who or what it might affect. Remember you are speaking in public
- Highlight the impact of your story (possibly linking to shared values or broader talking points).
- Link everything back to your What and Why.

Testimony Structure

Follow this format:

1. **Introduce yourself** and where you live. If you're a constituent of one of the district members, you can mention that too!
   a. e.g. "I am a [father/doctor/pastor/business owner/educator] and I have a nonbinary child," or "I grew up in [district]/have lived in [district for] ten years/am a new resident."

2. **Identify the proposal or issue** and state whether you are "in support" or "oppose" it, if relevant.
   a. e.g. "I am here in support of policy ##/in opposition to the districts' decision to ban the book X" or "I want to speak to you about the districts' bullying and harassment policies"

3. **Speak from the heart** and tell a story that illustrates your position (this can be your story of self or a loved one's story if you have consent to share it– be careful about sharing children's stories, full names, details of their life. If you are not comfortable sharing a story, you can also use some of the broad values-based talking points to illustrate the issue, and why it is important.
   a. Sample stories are shared in student testimony section of this toolkit

4. End your story **depicting the clear good or harm** this proposal would have on people in your community
   a. e.g. "Studies show that students who see themselves represented in books and curriculum at school do better on standardized tests, have better attendance, and are suspended less than students who don't."

5. Ask members to **take your position** on the issue.
   a. e.g. "I ask you to vote NO on policy ##" or "Please support [district name]'s LGBTQ+ students by supporting policy ## today"

6. Thank the committee.

Tips for crafting your testimony

- Lean on your expertise. You do not have to play the expert (unless you are)– your personal experience, story, and perspective add value and are also needed! You are the only one who can share your own perspective & lived experiences -- lean on that!

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." — Maya Angelou

- Practice your testimony. This helps you stick to time limits, catch anything that might confuse your audience, and get you comfortable before speaking in public.

- Remember that you may be on camera! Stay engaged and aware of your facial expressions.

- Bring a couple extra written copies. Written copies can be helpful to reference from while you deliver your testimony. Sometimes you can submit that written copy into the record, and if your testimony gets cut down or you aren't able to speak, the full version can still get included. Have extra copies to deliver to legislators after if you're comfortable.

- Best practice for likelihood that time is cut: Write a Testimony, then create an abbreviated version with main points for the probability that time is cut.

- Speak slowly, enunciate, and put a fine point on each answer.

- The members might ask you a few follow up questions after your testimony. Answer only the questions you can address directly and honestly. "I don't know" or "I can't address that" are completely okay answers.Return to your main message, and you can also always offer to look it up and follow up with the committee at a later date.

- Most importantly: Be yourself, be positive, and let your personality shine through!

- Prepare for the rules. Look up testimony details, where to sign up, who can speak, and ensure that you follow the time limit. Do not disrupt the meeting, even if anti-educational freedom agitators try to.

- Practice grounding/breathing for calming anxiety before, during, and after testimony. Find practices for managing your frustration, making meaning of the event, and letting go of the stress of the day.

- Be prepared. Bring snacks, water, other beverages, hand sanitizer, tissues, or quiet activities (e.g. fidget spinners, coloring books, homework) — meetings can take several hours and there may be limited opportunity to access food or other needs. Prepare for the meeting to take longer than you think it will.

- For safety, do not put your full address on your comment card. When you're introducing yourself, use regional locations instead of a specific city or town. In addition, some folks have used only their last initial instead of their full last name. You could even use a middle name or first name that you do not use regularly.

Emails

TIPS

1. Introduce yourself and why you are emailing up front. Tell your board member(s) your connection to the district (i.e. students, parent/guardian, community partner, etc) and identify the specific policy or issue you are writing about.

2. Keep it brief. Limit your email to a few short paragraphs. School board members are often very busy and may not have time to go through more than a few paragraphs

3. Personalize your message. Tell a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your community. School board members are more likely to be persuaded by a personal story than facts and data points.

4. Ask questions. You may ask a board member to propose a recommendation or ask a question at an open meeting relating to your concern.

Resource - Email Template

Click here to access an email template for contacting school members
- Use this as a start and edit to fit your voice, your story, and what you are advocating for - remember to keep it short but make sure to get your point across

Small Group Meetings

One of the most powerful tools when organizing is to create connections with those who are in positions of power. Through small group meetings with elected officials, you can begin to work on creating a relationship that is beneficial to both parties. We often only show up and call upon our school board members when there is an issue we want to address thus having a connection before this type of request is needed can aid in securing the win. One way to start this relationship building is to have small group meetings. In these small group meetings, it allows you to share about who you are, your connection to the work, and how we can be partners in the work. It also allows for you to learn more about the school board member(s) which, in turn, helps to create a relationship that extends beyond times of contention.

TIPS

1. **BREAKING BREAD:** If your budget allows, "breaking bread" is a great way to connect with school board members. There is power in sharing a meal - it makes the connection time less formal and creates a sense of community that cannot be replicated in a formal meeting

2. **ACCESSIBILITY/ ACCESS:** Small group meetings can be in person or online, thus allowing for folks to be able to join in different ways. Think about what makes most sense for you and your community - are you planning to meet with a more contentious board member? If so, an online space may be safer. Do you have folks who are brought into school board advocacy but have youth they care for and it is hard to meet in person? Then online may be a good option, so they can be in their home space with their youth during the meeting

3. **SAFETY:** Best practice is to have at least 2 organization members at each meeting, This allows for more face time for members and board members but is also a safety net should a conversation dive into a topic that is sensitive and/or contentious.

4. **RESOURCES:** Data, numbers, and stories speak to people in different ways. Think about materials that you bring to an in-person meeting or digital materials that you can share during a virtual meeting. These can include research reports, data, testimonials, etc., so board members can display their pronouns, etc. These resources not only act as information but are also a memento from the meeting and reminds the board member of the time you spent together.

Group Advocacy - Organizing Your Community

"Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much" — Helen Keller

Organizing as a group for school board and local advocacy is an exceptionally powerful tool because it transforms individual concerns into a collective force that can drive meaningful change. Here's how this approach becomes so impactful at the school board level:

1. Collective Power and Influence
- **Unified Voice:** When multiple individuals come together with a shared goal, their voices amplify. A school board may easily overlook a single person's complaint, but it's much harder to ignore a well-organized group representing a significant portion of the community.
- **Increased Leverage:** Numbers matter. A group representing hundreds of parents, teachers, or community members can wield significant influence, making it more likely that the school board will take your concerns seriously and act on them.

2. Representation of Broader Interests
- **Diverse Perspectives:** A group can bring together various stakeholders—parents, students, educators, and community members—each with unique insights and experiences. This diversity enriches the advocacy effort, allowing the group to address issues from multiple angles and propose well-rounded solutions.
- **Community Engagement:** A group can effectively represent the interests of a broader community, ensuring that the school board hears from a cross-section of voices rather than just a few individuals. This helps ensure that the decisions made are in the best interest of the wider community, not just a vocal minority.

3. Strategic Coordination
- **Organized Action:** Groups can plan and execute coordinated actions, such as attending school board meetings, organizing petitions, or hosting community forums. This level of organization makes your advocacy more visible and impactful.
- **Expertise and Resources:** In a group, individuals can contribute different skills—research, public speaking, legal knowledge, etc.—which can enhance the overall effectiveness of the advocacy effort. Pooling resources also allows for more sophisticated campaigns, such as professional outreach or media engagement.

4. Consistent and Sustained Pressure
- **Persistent Advocacy:** Organizing as a group allows for sustained pressure on the school board. While individuals might get discouraged or burnt out, a group can share responsibilities and maintain a consistent presence over time.
- **Follow-Through:** A group can better track the progress of its advocacy efforts, ensuring that promises made by the school board are followed up on and that issues are revisited if necessary.

5. Ability to Mobilize and Engage the Community
- **Mobilization:** Groups can mobilize larger numbers of people for events like protests, rallies, or town hall meetings, demonstrating widespread support for the cause. This can create a sense of urgency for the school board to address the issues being raised.
- **Building Alliances:** A well-organized group can forge alliances with other community organizations, local leaders, and even media outlets, broadening the reach of the advocacy and adding more pressure on the school board to act.

6. Enhanced Visibility and Accountability
- **Media Attention:** Groups are more likely to attract media coverage, which can further amplify the advocacy effort. The school board is more likely to be held accountable for its actions (or inaction) when the spotlight is on them.
- **Public Accountability:** A group can hold the school board publicly accountable by attending meetings en masse, presenting data and stories, and ensuring that the board's actions are visible to the broader community. This transparency can drive change more effectively than behind-the-scenes lobbying.

Organizing as a group for school board and local advocacy transforms individual concerns into a powerful, collective force. By pooling resources, coordinating actions, and representing a broader range of interests, groups can apply consistent and sustained pressure on school boards, making it more likely that their concerns will be addressed. This approach not only increases the chances of achieving specific advocacy goals but also strengthens community bonds and empowers individuals to continue advocating for positive change.

Safety, Security, and Hostile Opposition

Safety is paramount to the work we do and should be at the forefront of deciding when, where, and how to engage in school board advocacy.

Non-Engagement:
- Do not interact with people protesting against you or issues that you care about, your first response should always be to not engage.
- The opposition is often aggressively disruptive, and in most cases, folks who are protesting educational freedom are looking for engagement and want to capitalize on a moment where you are looking angry/upset/etc. Don't give them that content, and don't say anything that you wouldn't want recorded and shared - that's why not engaging is the safest response to opposition.
- Remember that different members of your community may have varying levels of comfort in moments of conflict. Non-engagement is a compassionate response to provocation.
- Try not to make eye contact with opposition.
- Try to stay in pairs or small groups when attending board meetings.
- Committee members, audience members, and people giving public testimony may be triggering, always remember that you can take a walk and leave the room for as long as you need.
- Don't put your full address or any other identifiable information if you don't feel comfortable. You could even use a pseudonym, middle name or first name only.

De-Escalation:
- Stay aware of your surroundings: Avoid listening to headphones with both ears, always have designated individuals to watch the crowd, recognize potential conflict before it becomes active conflict.
- If someone approaches you and the person is hostile, remember that the goal is to de-escalate, not to continue or ramp up the conflict. Do not match their energy. Stay calm and try to flag to someone else in the room that you need assistance.
- If the hostile person is asking questions about a specific issue or bill, the best approach is to say "I don't know the answer to that but I will get back to you," and work to gather their contact information.
- If you are attending as a group, establish an emergency phrase if you are requesting back up from a team member. For example: "Quinn, do you have an orange highlighter?" so that they know that you're dealing with an escalating situation and need support.
- If you are unable to de-escalate the situation, it is ok to ask the person to stop or to simply walk away.
- If you feel unsafe, you can also call for security, if available, or call 911. Please be aware that this option is not always safe for everyone in a group. The best option is to try to go with a group and keep each other safe using the safety of numbers and sound non-engagement and de-escalation tactics.

Other Considerations

Accessibility

Navigating a school board meeting as a person with accessibility needs, including disabilities or language barriers, can be challenging. Here are some suggestions to help you effectively participate:

1. Before the Meeting
- Research the Venue:
  - Physical Accessibility: Check if the venue is wheelchair accessible, with ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. Contact the school board to confirm these details.
  - Parking and Transportation: Identify accessible parking spaces and transportation options. If needed, arrange for accessible transportation.
- Request Accommodations:
  - Contact the school board in advance to request necessary accommodations, such as sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, or translated materials. Mention any specific needs like seating arrangements or accessible formats (large print, Braille).
- Prepare Your Materials:
  - Gather any documents you may need, and request them in accessible formats or your preferred language. Bring any personal assistive devices you might need.

2. Arriving at the Meeting
- Arrive Early:
  - Arriving early gives you time to familiarize yourself with the venue, find accessible seating, and test any assistive devices or technologies provided.
- Identify Key Personnel:
  - Identify and introduce yourself to key personnel, such as interpreters, support staff, or meeting facilitators, who can assist you during the meeting.

3. During the Meeting
- Use Provided Accommodations:
  - Take advantage of any accommodations you've requested, such as interpreters, assistive listening devices, or accessible seating. If you encounter any issues, notify the staff immediately.
- Communicate Your Needs:
  - Don't hesitate to ask for assistance or clarification if you need it. Whether it's asking for a translation, requesting someone to speak louder or slower, or needing a break, your needs are important.
- Engage with Support Persons:
  - If you've brought a support person, let them assist you in navigating the meeting, whether it's helping with communication, taking notes, or advocating on your behalf.

4. Participating in Discussions
- Use Translation Services:
  - If English isn't your first language, make use of any translation services available. If needed, ask questions or provide input in your preferred language.
- Accessible Communication:
  - If you're contributing to the discussion, speak slowly and clearly. If you're non-verbal or prefer written communication, inform the board and use accessible methods like writing or typing.
- Advocacy:
  - If you feel your needs are not being met, advocate for yourself. Don't hesitate to speak up or ask someone to speak on your behalf.

5. After the Meeting
- Follow-Up:
  - After the meeting, follow up with the school board if there were any issues with accommodations or if you need further clarification on what was discussed.
- Provide Feedback:
  - Give feedback on your experience, especially regarding accessibility. This can help improve the accessibility of future meetings for everyone.
- Stay Informed:
  - Keep track of future meetings and any developments discussed that are relevant to your interests or needs. Consider joining a community group or advocacy organization that can offer additional support.

6. Remote Participation (If Applicable)
- Virtual Attendance:
  - If attending in person is not feasible, inquire about remote participation options like video conferencing. Ensure these platforms are accessible and offer features like live captions or sign language interpretation.
- Technology Support:
  - Before the meeting, test any necessary technology and ensure you know how to access accessibility features. Ask for technical assistance if needed.

By taking these steps, you can better navigate school board meetings and ensure that your voice is heard, regardless of any accessibility needs or language barriers you may have.

Personal Mental Health

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare." — Audre Lorde

Attending a school board meeting, especially one where potentially triggering topics are discussed, can be challenging for anyone, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals and other members of marginalized communities who may face additional stress. Here are some mental health tips to help you prepare and protect your well-being:

1. Before the Meeting:
- Know Your Limits: Understand your triggers and emotional boundaries. It's okay to set limits on how long you stay or how much you engage.
- Plan for Support: Consider attending the meeting with a friend, ally, or support group member who can provide emotional support. Having someone there who understands your concerns can be comforting.
- Prepare Grounding Techniques: Learn and practice grounding techniques like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or visualization. These can help you stay calm if you start to feel overwhelmed.
- Establish an Exit Plan: If the conversation becomes too intense, it's okay to leave. Plan a polite way to exit the room or take a break if needed. Knowing you have an out can reduce anxiety.
- Pre-Meeting Self-Care: Engage in activities that help you feel centered and calm before the meeting, such as meditation, journaling, or listening to music that uplifts you.

2. During the Meeting:
- Stay Grounded: Use the grounding techniques you've prepared if you start feeling anxious or triggered. Focus on your breathing or a calming image.
- Limit Exposure: If a particular topic is triggering, consider using earplugs or headphones with calming music to reduce the impact while still being present.
- Focus on Allies: If the conversation becomes difficult, look for supportive faces in the room. Knowing that there are people who stand with you can help you feel less isolated.
- Engage Selectively: If you feel the need to speak, do so only when you feel emotionally safe. If a point must be made, consider writing it down to organize your thoughts and minimize the emotional toll.

3. After the Meeting:
- Decompress: Allow yourself time to unwind after the meeting. Engage in activities that help you relax, such as taking a walk, talking with a friend, or spending time with a pet.
- Reach Out for Support: If the meeting was particularly intense, talk to someone you trust about your experience. Sometimes, just expressing your feelings can help alleviate stress.
- Reflect on Your Experience: Take some time to journal or reflect on what happened during the meeting. Acknowledge any emotions that arose and how you handled them.
- Practice Self-Compassion: Be kind to yourself after the meeting. Remind yourself that it's okay to feel however you feel, and it's okay to take the time you need to recover.
- Consider Professional Support: If the meeting was particularly triggering, consider speaking with a therapist who can help you process the experience.

4. Long-Term Strategies:
- Build a Support Network: Cultivate a group of supportive friends, allies, or LGBTQ+ community members who can provide ongoing support and solidarity.
- Educate Yourself on Advocacy: Understanding the issues at hand and how you can advocate for your rights can empower you and reduce feelings of helplessness.
- Engage in Self-Care Regularly: Incorporate self-care practices into your daily routine to maintain your mental health and resilience over time.

Your mental well-being is just as important as your advocacy efforts. Taking care of yourself ensures you can continue to contribute effectively and sustain your involvement in the long run.

Resource - Trevor Lifeline for LGBTQ+ Youth

- We're here for you! If you are thinking about harming yourself — get immediate crisis support. Connect to a crisis counselor 24/7, 365 days a year, from anywhere in the U.S via text, chat, or phone. The Trevor Project is 100% confidential and 100% free.

- Click here for the Trevor Project webpage

- If you are in need of immediate support call 1-866-488-7386 or Text "Start" to 678-678

GLSEN®

Resources

ASO communications Winning Against Right-Wing Scapegoating on Race and Trans Youth Advancing Our Progressive Vision with a Race Class Gender Narrative

- Messaging guides

GLSEN Model Policies Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy - district and Legislation

GLSEN Model Local Education Agency Policies on Implementing Title IX

GLSEN Policy Navigator - tracking tool of state level policies

GLSEN State and Local Rise Up one pager and toolkit

Movement Advancement Project, Equality Federation: TALKING ABOUT Anti-LGBTQ School Bills & False 'Groomer' Attacks

PFLAG - Plan to Testify at Local Board Meetings

School Board School - Take Action

United Against Books - Guide to Attending Library and School Board Meetings

Appendix

School Board Advocacy Basics

Organizing a community to advocate at a school board meeting requires thoughtful planning and effective communication. Here are some tips to help you lead a successful advocacy effort. Make sure to share this basics sheet with the folks you are in community with to have shared knowledge around school board engagement.

1. Know the Issues:
- Research the Agenda: Understand the key issues that will be discussed at the meeting. Gather facts, data, and any relevant documents to back up your position.
- Clarify Objectives: Clearly define what you want to achieve. Is it a policy change, funding for a program, or addressing a specific concern? Make sure everyone in the group understands the goals.

2. Build a Coalition:
- Identify Key Stakeholders: Reach out to parents, teachers, students, and community members who are affected by the issue. Ensure that diverse voices are represented.
- Assign Roles: Delegate tasks such as speaking, note-taking, and coordinating logistics. Having a clear structure will help the group function smoothly.
- Train Your Team: Provide guidance on how to speak effectively, frame arguments, and respond to questions. Consider holding a mock meeting to practice.

3. Mobilize Support:
- Use Social Media: Create awareness and gather support by posting on social media platforms. Share the date, time, and location of the meeting, and encourage people to attend.
- Petitions and Letters: Circulate petitions or encourage community members to send letters or emails to school board members expressing their support for the cause.
- Organize Pre-Meeting Gatherings: Hold a meeting or rally before the board meeting to energize the group and discuss final strategies.

4. Effective Communication:
- Prepare Talking Points: Draft clear and concise talking points that align with your goals. Make sure everyone is on the same page.
- Storytelling: Encourage members to share personal stories that highlight how the issue affects them. This can be more persuasive than just presenting facts.
- Respectful Tone: Maintain a respectful and constructive tone during the meeting, even if there are disagreements.

5. During the Meeting:
- Arrive Early: Get there early to ensure you have seating together and can sign up to speak if required.
- Follow Protocol: Adhere to the meeting's rules, such as time limits for speakers or specific procedures for addressing the board.
- Show Unity: Wear the same color or a specific badge to visually show that you are a united group.

6. Follow Up:
- Thank the Board: After the meeting, send thank-you notes or emails to the school board members, regardless of the outcome. This builds goodwill for future interactions.
- Debrief with Your Group: Discuss what went well and what could be improved for next time. Plan any necessary follow-up actions.
- Keep the Momentum: Stay engaged with the issue and continue to mobilize the community until your goals are achieved.

7. Legal and Ethical Considerations:
- Know Your Rights: Understand your rights to speak and organize under the school district's policies and local laws.
- Transparency: Be open about your goals and methods with your group and the community at large.

By carefully organizing and preparing, you can effectively advocate for your cause and make a meaningful impact at the school board meeting.